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# Engaging Youth through Social Media

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*The last two decades have witnessed a decline in voter turnout, most noticeably among young voters. During this same period, the use of cell phones and digital and social media has increased dramatically. Effective use of social media tools has the exciting potential to connect young voters with political decision-makers and to help rebuild the relationship between citizens, elected officials and parliamentary democracy. This article offers some new ideas about how to engage with young people.*



Before turning to how a variety of social media tools can be used to engage voters, I would like to quickly sketch out the challenges we face engaging young people and getting them out to vote.

The national trend of declining voter turnout is most pronounced among young Canadians. For example in the 2008 federal election, 36% of people aged 18-24 voted and the last election in my province in 2009 had lower numbers still: only 27% of eligible youth aged 18-24 voted. Youth participation is slightly higher in other countries: 51% of American youth aged 19 to 29 voted in 2008; and 44% of 18-24 year olds in the UK cast ballots in 2010.

A lot of research has been done on this topic. The overall conclusion is that young people are not voting because they feel distanced from the operations of the political system and because they lack a clear understanding of how the political system and parliamentary democracy function.

To encourage youth to participate in the electoral process BC's Chief Electoral Officer recommends that BC legislators consider allowing provisional registration of individuals when they are 16 years old. While youth would remain unable to vote until they turn 18, provisional registration could allow Elections BC to work with schools and the driver licensing programs to ensure the maximum number of students

are registered voters before leaving high school. In addition to this proposed change in the rules for voter registration I look forwards to seeing how the use of online voter registration and online voting can also facilitate the engagement of youth and increase overall voting levels.

In the past the BC Legislative Assembly and Elections BC have partnered to use digital media to increase youth engagement. In 2009 a project called "Democracy on Location" was launched to recognize and celebrate the second annual United Nations International Day of Democracy. Students were invited to create a two-minute video about democracy in their lives at school, home or with their friends. The winning video — "Why Should Youth Care About Democracy?" — was created by four students from Burnaby North Secondary School. The winning students travelled to Victoria to be interviewed for Hansard TV, toured the Parliament Buildings, to learn about parliamentary democracy and learn about professional video production and broadcasting. The winning video was posted on the Elections BC website and on the Legislative Assembly website and played on Hansard Television.

Since disengagement and under-education are, in part, an explanation for low voter turnout and youth disaffection with politics then there is a clear role for elected officials to encourage youth participation. New tools, like Twitter, Youtube, Linkedin and QR codes provide exciting engagement and teaching opportunities for parliamentarians.

In British Columbia traditional outreach activities in our constituencies include speaking to school groups, participating in youth parliaments, engaging with youth organizations and encouraging youth participation during election campaigns. Today, Members of the Legislative Assembly are also working

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*Linda Reid is Deputy Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. This is a revised presentation of her address to the 50th Canadian Regional CPA Conference held in Québec City in July 2012.*

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to bring politics alive through a variety of social media platforms.

Close to 50 of BC's 85 MLAs now have active Facebook pages and an even greater number of MLAs use Twitter to communicate with constituents. Members use these platforms to post photos of events they host and to share video clips of the statements they make in the House. I even book meetings with constituents using Twitter!

Both Facebook and Twitter allow Members to converse with voters about issues of concern. For example, Private Members and Ministers in British Columbia, host "Twitter town halls" that encourage old and young alike to voice their concerns and engage with their elected representative. As part of these town halls British Columbians are encouraged to ask MLAs questions or express opinions on Twitter. By using a specific hash tag, the tweets are compiled and Members can engage in an online discussion and answer questions. Town halls hosted by Members have focused on local issues but are also used to interact with all British Columbians on province-wide issues like education and job creation.

In autumn 2011, our Committees Office launched a Facebook page to keep the public up to date with information and photos about the work of BC's parliamentary committees. Information about upcoming meetings and reports, about committee public consultation processes, and pictures from committee meetings are posted online. In addition to print ads about committee public consultations, online advertisements and ads on Facebook are also being used to reach out as many British Columbians as possible.

During the annual budget consultation last fall members of the Select Standing Committee of Finance and Government Services posted tweets with pictures and comments about what they heard on their tour of the province in an effort to engage youth.

MLAs also make use of blogs to update constituents and engage with citizens. Many Members make regular postings about their work in the House and events in the community. In some cases these blogs also include an opportunity for constituents to comment on posts — another new way digital tools can be used to interact with constituents.

There are other online networking tools that are also useful for Parliamentarians to get connected with young people in their communities.

The use of QR codes is increasingly popular in British Columbia. QR, or quick response, codes are

a type of bar code that can be read by smart phones, which many young people have. By placing QR code on a document, or on my business card, access to additional information is simplified — just scan the code and the designated webpage will load. These codes have also been used by the Clerk of Committees Office on print advertising for public consultations taking place. By including the codes in the ads citizens are quickly directed to an online form where they can share their views.

***We only need to watch the evening news to see how social media tools can mobilize young people to get involved in politics.***

Linkedin is also a great, and free, networking tool available to parliamentarians. Though my online profile I am able to connect with students, employers and businesses in my community.

Youtube provides a unique way to interact with and inspire younger voters. Both the Government of BC and a number of MLAs in my province share information using online video clips. The Government website showcases local businesses and provincial parks whereas some Members tape their monthly updates and post them online for all constituents to see. Members also post clips from Hansard to demonstrate to their constituents the work that takes place in the House.

There are numerous ways digital and social media tools can be used to facilitate interaction between young people, parliamentarians and the political system. Designing youth-friendly tools and providing youth with an opportunity to provide feedback to legislators on issues that touch their lives are important components of fueling civic engagement and voting practice is crucial to developing a connection between British Columbians and their Legislature.

